

Making African Continental Integration Sustainable: Digital Trade and the Role of the AfCFTA

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Although the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) was signed in [2018](#), moving towards faster operationalization took five years. The agreement, boasting 54 signatories, is one of the world's most extensive free trade agreements and encompasses over a billion people. It aims to establish a unified market, bringing life to the long-standing dream of continental integration. In pursuit of this vision, the African Union's (AU) [theme](#) for 2023 was "Acceleration of African Continental Free Trade Agreement Implementation."

The AfCFTA has breathed life into [plans](#) to bridge Africa's digital divide and develop a single digital market (SDM). Nevertheless, successfully implementing the AfCFTA will require several fundamental components to bridge the digital gap while fostering sustainability. These key elements, namely security and regional harmonization, must be supported by a suitable partnership. The United States positioning itself as a strategic enabler would strengthen US-Africa relations.

Holistic sustainability requires digital technologies for social and economic transformation while [promoting innovation](#). Digital trade under the AfCFTA hinges on effective policy harmonization and interoperability. These are crucial to address vulnerabilities in various areas, including intellectual property protection, data protection, and cybersecurity.

Bodies like the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) need to establish the groundwork for an SDM as they work towards utilizing the AfCFTA. Moreover, African states too often focus on becoming "regional digital hubs" but neglect the significance of working collectively. For example, how can regional digital trade be facilitated if a pivotal state like [Nigeria](#) lacks adequate digital policy harmonization within the Economic Community of West African States ([ECOWAS](#))?

The AU took nine years to ratify and implement the [Malabo Convention on Cyber Security](#). Similarly, the slow pace of negotiating and implementing an AfCFTA [protocol on Digital Trade](#) (the e-commerce protocol) threatens the SDM's viability. These efforts could be supported by expanding the [scope](#) of the Biden-Harris administration's [Digital Transformation in Africa \(DTA\)](#).

Importantly, the e-commerce protocol immensely benefits Africa and its partners by improving inter-continental trade. Equipping African states with the ability to leverage cross-border data flows will sustain their contribution to the global digital economy beyond the initial enthusiasm of the historic AfCFTA.